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Bombs and Bullets Provoke Stampede at Archbishop's Funeral

The solemn funeral mass for assassinated Archbishop of San Salvador Oscar Arnulfo Romero on 30 March was turned into a panicked stampede when a bomb was exploded in the square in front of the cathedral, followed by gunfire. Some of the people who were crowded into the square began to run for the side streets, while others swarmed up the packed steps of the cathedral, clawing their way over those in front of them, who had been filling past the coffin. Some 24 people died and at least 70 were injured, most from asphyxiation and being trampled. An eight-foot high steel fence and a closed gate at the top of the cathedral steps, which were intended to provide security for the ceremony, turned into the principal cause of the disaster, as the panicked crowd vainly tried to take sanctuary in the cathedral. Most of those who died were crushed against the fence. The explosions and gunfire in the cathedral area continued for about 50 minutes. (U)

Eyewitnesses who were occupying different vantage points on the balconies of buildings surrounding the square differ on how the violence began. Several said that the initial explosion was a "propaganda bomb" set off by the heavily armed members of leftist militant organizations, who had marched in among the crowd only a few minutes earlier. Such bombs are often used by the militants to launch leaflets into the air. One corpse found in the area where the first explosion appeared to have taken place was missing a hand, which had been blown away by a bomb the victim was carrying. Whether this bomb accidentally exploded and set off the chaos, or whether the man was subsequently shot and the bomb then detonated is unclear. (U)

One reporter who was standing on a high balcony of the cathedral said that bombs and shots first issued from the National Palace, which faces onto the same square as the cathedral. This has not been corroborated by other witnesses. Although soldiers were on duty inside the National Palace, no uniformed military personnel were seen anywhere near the square before, during, or immediately after the incident. The armed forces had earlier announced their intention to

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maintain a low profile throughout the ceremony. According to church officials the militant leftist organizations had promised not to cause any incident during the funeral service. The crowd present at the scene was relatively small, only about one-third of the number that had been expected to turn out. The atmosphere was so tense, however, that no matter where the first explosion and shots came from the crowd reacted by reflex action. (U)

The Government troops, who had been confined to their barracks during the day, were ordered into downtown San Salvador at 5:30 in the afternoon "to restore order and protect the property of honorable Salvadorans". In separate interviews broadcast in the afternoon over the national radio network two members of the junta emphasized that the junta had taken every possible precaution to avoid involvement in any outbreak of violence during the funeral. Both placed full blame for the violence on the extreme left, stating that the security forces had avoided provocative actions. (U)

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